

# Prologue

**T**he first thing US Marine Corporal Mark Greenwood noticed when he woke up half-buried in a sand dune was the intense heat. He hated the heat. He hated the desert.

So, when he realized he was on fire, he was downright pissed.

“Shit!” he shouted, and patted his burning arms. He rolled in the sand until he managed to douse the flames on his head and shoulders.

When he was sure he was no longer burning, he stood and assessed his situation. He was outside the ruins of what looked like some kind of medical building. Chunks of rubble lay scattered around him, half burying the broken and charred bodies of what he assumed had once been human men. A smoke trail rose from inside the building and twisted away on a dust devil. The interior walls glowed amber. Mark sniffed the air. Odors of propellant, charcoal, and blood assaulted him. An air traffic control tower loomed over him, and beyond it, an air strip stretched toward the horizon.

Pain shot through his skull. Electric.

He jammed one palm against the back of his head—it felt wet, sticky. He gnashed his teeth.

“Relief,” he whispered. “Relief, damn it.”

A cool wave washed over his body. The pain subsided.

The corporal lowered his hand. Blood covered it. Blood and some kind of grayish stuff.

The world around him shimmered, like a mirage. He squeezed his eyes shut and counted to ten, then opened them again. Blinked several times. No more shimmering. Better.

It’d been a long time since he’d felt pain like that. Something must’ve hit him hard. But he didn’t have time to figure out what it was.

“Foxtrot team,” he said into his radio, his voice deep and raspy. “What’s your position?”

The radio crackled and hissed.

“This is Greenwood. Hostiles are down. I repeat. Hostiles are down. Awaiting orders.”

Still no response.

“Sergeant, where the fuck are you?”

Automatic rifles popped in the distance. Mark scanned the ground. Where was his M27?

More gunfire. Well, he didn’t need a rifle, anyway.

Pebbles kicked up in a wake behind him as he sprinted across the sand.

Something felt off. His right leg wobbled with each footfall. He had to fight to keep his six-foot frame balanced as he ran. After a few seconds, he stopped and looked down.

A jagged piece of white bone poked through his Combat Utility Uniform below the knee. The camouflage was stained black.

“Shit on a stick.” Mark bent over to push the bone back into place. Pain shot up his thigh. Gritting his teeth, he kept his fingertip pressed on the bone and started counting. He could feel the bone weaving together, and when he reached sixty, he let go. The bone still felt unstable, but it would have to do. He resumed his sprint.

The Humvee stood perched atop a dune half a click away, the front passenger tire flat. He spotted Lance Corporal John Kirby inside the armored turret, manning the M2 cannon. He couldn’t see Sergeant Grant or the others.

Movement caught his eye. Off to the left.

Two soldiers holding rifles raced toward the Humvee.

A fly buzzed by his ear. Mark swatted it away and focused.

*Hostiles!*

Something popped inside his skull. Tiny shocks jolted his brain, forcing him to stop running. He pressed both palms against his head and roared in agony.

“Relief. Relief. Relief.”

The pain washed away. He lowered his hands.

*Eliminate all resistance.*

The voice came from inside his head. Toneless. Genderless. Commanding.

Adrenaline surged through his body. The last remnants of pain vanished.

Mark squinted. The hostiles were only a quarter click from the Humvee. Why wasn't Kirby shooting at them? It was almost like . . .

*Eliminate all resistance.*

With a grunt, Mark ran. Harder. Faster. He closed the distance in less than five seconds.

The hostiles turned and raised their rifles.

He ripped their weapons away, snapping their wrists. The hostiles screamed.

He tossed one rifle to the ground and swung the other with both hands. The stock smashed in the face of one of the hostiles. The other tried to run. Mark shot him in the back, turned, and finished off the one he'd battered.

Another fly buzzed in his ear. He wiggled his finger in the canal until it stopped. Fucking desert bugs.

Someone shouted from the Humvee.

The M2 roared to life, fifty-caliber rounds whizzing through the air.

Mark froze. Why was Kirby firing at him?

A round slammed into Mark's shoulder, ripping a hole through the muscle. He screamed and forced himself to stare through the haze of white-hot pain at the Humvee turret.

No, it wasn't Kirby. Son of a bitch. That was why he hadn't shot at the hostiles. The man at the cannon *was* a hostile.

Another round grazed his thigh. Rage burned a swath through his body. He threw away the rifle and dashed toward the Humvee.

The cannon kept firing at him. He ignored the rounds pummeling his body armor, even the ones that managed to penetrate his side and abdomen.

Mark scrambled over the Humvee's hood and leaped onto the roof.

The hostile punched at him. Mark caught the fist and twisted, hearing and feeling a loud crack.

That earned a scream. Mark grabbed the hostile's throat with his other hand. He squeezed, and the neck snapped.

Mark hurled the lifeless body onto the sand.

"Greenwood!"

The voice sounded familiar. Mark looked down.

A US Marine stood next to the Humvee, aiming an SSW40 grenade launcher at him. It took a moment for the corporal to recognize Sergeant Gardner Grant. He was about Mark's height and build but lacked the hard edges. On the ground

nearby, another Marine nursed her injured leg with one hand and leveled an M18 pistol with the other. Corporal Micaela Deodato.

Grant's eyes widened, his lips twisting into a grimace as he asked, "What the hell happened to you?"

Mark tried to process a response but couldn't. He'd just saved them from the hostiles. Why were they pointing guns at him?

"Why did you kill those men?"

Again, Mark stumbled over the question. But this time he was able to find an answer. "I was following orders."

"Not my orders. Whose?"

*Eliminate all resistance.*

The world shimmered. That fucking fly buzzed in his ear again.

Mark rubbed his eyes and squinted.

Something about Grant's face wasn't right. It looked like him—but it wasn't. Mark glanced at Deodato. Same with her. Their eyes were cold. Distant.

They'd flipped sides.

Mark swung the M2 around and locked on to Grant.

"You traitors!" he shouted.

"Corporal," Grant said, keeping the SSW40 trained on Mark. "Stand down."

Sweat streamed down the corporal's cheeks. His shoulders tightened. This was total FUBAR. His whole team couldn't have betrayed him.

*Eliminate all resistance.*

He tightened his grip on the cannon. It didn't matter. He had to complete his mission.

"Get down, Sergeant!" Deodato shouted. Her pistol fired.

Bullets streaked toward Mark. One grazed his cheek. The other buried itself in his arm. He roared and rotated the M2 in her direction. The cannon spat at Deodato, and she crumpled to the ground.

The SSW40 in Grant's hands made a heavy *thump-thump* sound. Grenades whizzed toward Mark.

The world exploded.